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ABSTRACT

Given that traditional societies provide women with clearly defined roles, married women in traditional communities might experience less depression than women who have conflicting role expectations. To examine this issue, 43 Lubavitch Hassidic Jewish women from two northeastern communities were interviewed concerning their satisfaction with various aspects of their lives and were administered the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scale (Radloff, 1974). The two groups' life satisfaction and depression levels were compared to each other and the two groups' pooled responses were compared to national norms. It was hypothesized that the Lubavitch group as a whole would be more satisfied with life and less depressed than the American norms because of the Lubavitch lifestyle and ideology. The results showed that Lubavitch women's life satisfaction in general was higher than that of the national norms, though satisfaction with some specific areas of their lives proved to be lower than the norm. The Lubavitch women were also found to be less depressed than the normative sample of American women. (Author/NB)

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LUBAVITCH WOMEN: DEPRESSION AND LIFE SATISFACTION IN A TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY

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Paper presented at the Eastern Psychological Association Meetings, Arlington, VA April 10, 1987

ABSTRACT

Forty three Lubavitch Hassidic Jewish women from two northeastern communities were interviewed concerning their satisfaction with various aspects of their lives and administered the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scale (Radloff, 1974). The two groups' life satisfaction and depression levels were compared to each other, and the two groups' pooled responses were compared to national norms. It was expected that the Lubavitch group as a whole would be more satisfied with life and less depressed than the American norms, because of the Lubavitch lifestyle and ideology. The results show that Lubavitch women's life satisfaction in general is higher than the national norms, though satisfaction with some specific areas of their life proved to be lower. The Lubavitch women were also less depressed than the normative sample of American women.

INTRODUCTION

Jessie Bernard suggests that "being a housewife makes women sick" (1973, p. 53). Gove and Tudor (1973) suggest that working women should be less depressed than housewives because working women have an added source of potential reinforcement. However, Gove (1973) also notes that working wives are overworked because they also shoulder the responsibilities of a housewife.

In a review of the literature on depression among housewives and working women, Shehan (1984) finds no consistent findings: some studies find that working wives are less depressed, others find that housewives are less depressed, and yet others find no difference. Shehan explains this lack of consistent findings from a social exchange framework, where a specific woman's well-being depends on the rewards, costs, cost reduction, and alternative sources of gratification that her lifestyle provides, as well as her subjective evaluation of her behavioral outcomes. There is one consistent difference, however. Married women are significantly more likely to become depressed than are married men (Gove, 1973, Radloff, 1974).

It may be that in modern society women's efforts overall are not as highly reinforced as men's, and this, according to Lewinsohn (1974) may result in depression. Further, women are not provided with clearly defined roles; housewives may feel that they are not acomplishing enough in their lives, and working wives may feel that they are neglecting their

traditional duties of mother and wife, becomming torn between trying to advance in their career and spending sufficient time with their children (Gove & Tudor, 1973). Equal division of childcare and household chores with men would enable women to work outside the home and experience less conflict, but as yet most husbands only "help out" with these tasks, instead of sharing half the responsibility (Poloma & Garland, 1971).

Traditional societies provide women with clearly defined roles. Married women in traditional communities might therefore experience less depression than women who have conflicting role expectations. Gove and Lester (1975) found that women living in the south of the United States experienced less mental illness than those living in the north, and they attributed this to the more traditional lifestyle of the south of the country. The data we report here concern the life satisfaction and reports of depression of women who have embraced a very traditional role in a traditional religious community. Their role appears to be highly valued, and their priorities clearly defined. The ideology and lifestyle of their community lead us to predict that these women will be less depressed and more satisfied with life than the norm in American secular samples.

The Lubavitch Community

The women in this study belong to a Jewish religious Hassidic sect called "Lubavitch." The following description comes from the senior author's familiarity with the Lubavitch

community and the following sources: Rader and Rader (1979), and Friedfertig and Schapiro (1981). The Lubavitch headquarters are in Crown Heights, New York, with about 200 000 members. They have smaller settlements in 25 other states, and 18 other countries. The Hassidic movement originated in Europe, and those who have emigrated to the U.S. have maintained most of their traditional belief system. Their philosophy combines Orthodox Judaism with a strong mystical tradition. Each generation has a Rebbe (head rabbi) who is a spiritual leader thought to have some supernatural powers which he has earned by elevating himself, through prayer, study and good deeds, nearer to God.

The Lubavitch are very traditional in their values and their religious observance. They use modern technology where it can serve religious needs or help make a living, but avoid it if it involves an intrusion of unwelcome values. For example, few own television sets because they do not want to be exposed to the secular values presented on television. However, they have advertised on T.V. to invite outsiders to their celebration of a Jewish holiday. (The Lubavitch have an extensive outreach program in which they attempt to bring secular Jews back to the faith.) The Lubavitch Rebbe himself has a degree in engineering, and computer programming is a common profession for this group.

Men and women have clearly assigned roles, though there is some overlap. Women are primarily responsible for "gezunt und parnosseh," the family's health and livelihood. They are

responsible for the household and for raising large families (contraceptives are not used), but they also work outside the home to earn money if they can manage it. Lubavitch women don't necessarily work outside the home more than others, but when they do, this is considered a natural extension of the woman's role. Men, on the other hand, earn most respect by studying Jewish religious writings rather than by supporting their family financially. They usually work for pay during the day and study only in the evenings, but there are instances of scholars who study all day and are supported by their wives or the community. Hence, earning a living is not exclusively the male's role, and it is not as prestigious as learning, which is a commandment given to men. Women are expected to understand only the religious laws which pertain to them; learning is not a high priority for women, though there are classes offered for women who can find the time to attend them.

There are parallels between the male and female roles in the Hassidic and the secular worlds. In both places men engage in the occupations that are seen as most prestigious by that community, namely religious learning for the Hassidic community, and providing for one's family in the secular world. However, when we look at what is left for the women, we find that Hassidic women have a clearly defined dual role-- raising large families (up to 10 children) and often providing partial financial support for their families. The commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" is taken literally since Jewish survival has been threatened by the Holocaust and by a high rate of

interfaith marriages. Bearing children who can be raised to carry on the Jewish faith is a Lubavitch goal. Women are expected not only to bear the children but to infuse them with the love and respect of religion.

A young woman's education typically extends to two years of college, from which she may receive a teaching certificate. Women may further their education in secular fields as long as the subject does not cause conflict with religion, but there is no formal educational system set up for women who wish to study religion in depth as men do. Women cannot be ordained to be rabbis, and they cannot hold leadership positions in the community. They cannot even take an active part in the worshiping services: they sit separately from the men, behind a "mehitsa" (partitioning), and they are not allowed to sing outloud. This system is meant to ensure that the men's concentration in prayer is not disturbed by the sight or sound of a woman.

Most Lubavitch women accept these limitations as part of their faith, believing that both men and women are simply following their God's will. Some women who would like to see changes bring their grievances to the rabbis. However, the rabbis have the authority to legislate over the community and their final word is accepted, whether or not it pleases. If still dissatisfied, the woman's task is to alter her faulty way of thinking and recognize the wisdom of the law as it stands.

The Lubavitch group differs from other Hassidic groups in their efforts to glorify the traditional women's role.

The Rebbe often gives inspirational talks to the women alone, to which Lubavitch and non-Lubavitch women come from considerable distances. There is an active Lubavitch women's organization which has a newsletter, meetings and conventions and is involved with outreach work.

Lubavitch women have a clearly defined role in the community. Their first responsibility is caring for their children, followed by doing charity or outreach work, earning money, and attending religious classes. Where home and work obligations clash, the home always comes first. Career achievements are not as important as successful child rearing.

In addition to clear role definitions, the Lubavitch have strict laws pertaining to sexual conduct. Men's and women's dress covers their bodies from head to toe. Men usually wear black and white clothing, hats and long black coats. Women wear long sleeved, high necked blouses and skirts or dresses, never pants. Married women cover their hair with a scarf or wig. Men and women not married to each other may not touch, not even shake hands, even if they are related. Spouses may also not touch each other during the woman's menstrual period and seven days thereafter.

There is very little mingling between the sexes; a man and a woman not married to each other can talk if there is a practical reason for doing so (i.e. during a business transaction) but they would not chat with each other simply for pleasure. At community affairs, men and women sit at separate tables, and if there is dancing men and women dance in separate

groups with a partition between them. Sexual intercourse between husband and wife is considered a holy act, meant for both procreation and pleasure. However, extreme safeguards are taken against the temptations of premarital and extramarital sex.

One consequence of the segregation of the sexes is that women act relatively independently of men in their charity and outreach work, as well as in their familial duties. They are expected to be efficient and productive in their own domain. Men are in charge of the religious functions and the women are in charge of the charitable organizations which are extensive and of great importance. The Lubavitch do not have a stereotype of women as passive and dependent. Every Friday night at services, men chant a poem written by king David about "a woman of valor," who is worth "far more than rubies" because she "...works with her willing hands.../She rises while it is yet night,/And gives food to her household,/...She considers a field and buys it;/With her earnings she plants a vineyard,/She girds herself with strength,/And braces her arm for work.../She stretches out her hand to the poor/" while "Her husband is known at the gates,/As he sits among the elders of the land/(studying) (Proverbs 31:10 31, Old Testament).

We conducted this research to see whether Lubavitch women, with their well defined and valued roles, are less depressed than mainstream American women. Paradoxically, women who adhere to a religious view which is oppressive by some standards might experience less depression than women who have a less

traditional but also less explicit ideology. In this study a sample of Lubavitch women was interviewed, and their level of depression was measured. We predict that the Lubavitch women would be less depressed and more satisfied with life than a national norm.

SUBJECTS

The women interviewed for this study are 43 married Lubavitch women ranging from age 21 to 60. Their mean age is 34. All of the women live in one of two communities in the northeastern United States. Ninety-five percent of the members of the smaller one of the two communities was included in the study. Their socioeconomic status is middle class. The number of children ranges from 0 to 9, with an average of 3.6. (The real average for the Lubavitch population is probably higher; many of the women in this sample were at the beginning of their childbearing years, or have become religious during their adult lives, in which case they started having children later.) The women ranged in education from high school to the PhD level. The average number of years beyond high school was 3.5.

METHOD

The women were contacted by phone and offered $4.00 for their participation in a study concerning the lives of Lubavitch women. Ninety four% of those contacted agreed to an

interview. The senior author went to the women's homes and interviewed each for approximately 30 minutes. The questions covered (a) background information and (b) their degree of satisfaction with various aspects of their lives. The subjects were asked to briefly describe their feelings about being Lubavitch. The other measures of satisfaction were taken from Campbell, Converse and Rodgers' (1976) study of "The Quality of American Life" which reports on a cross section of American women. The questions used were the following:

1. Different people feel differently about taking care of the home. I don't mean taking care of the children, but things like cooking, sewing and keeping house. Some women look on these things as just a job that has to be done; other women really enjoy them. How do you feel about this? Overall how satisfied are you with your housework? Which number (from 1 to 7) comes closest to how satisfied or dissatisfied you feel?

2. Would you say that being a mother has always been enjoyable, that it has nearly always been enjoyable, that it has usually been enjoyable, that it has sometimes been enjoyable, or that being a mother has hardly ever been enjoyable?

3. How much companionship do you and your husband have--how often do you do things alone together? All the time, very often, often, sometimes, or hardly ever?

4. All things considered, how satisfied are you with your marriage (on a seven point scale)?

5. We have talked about various parts of your life. Now I want to ask you about your life as a whole. How satisfied are you

with your life as a whole (on a seven point scale)?

At the end of the interview, the women completed the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D) (Radloff, 1974). The group's responses on the CES-D were later compared to the norms for married American women provided by Radloff. The women's depression scores were also correlated with their responses to the interview items.

After completing the questionnaire, the women were told about the purpose of the study and asked not to reveal the hypotheses to anyone. They were asked to name one or more "average Lubavitch women" who might be willing to be interviewed.

RESULTS

Depression.

The level of depression in the Lubavitch samples from the two cities were not significantly different from one another, so the two groups were combined to form the "Lubavitch" group. Two t-tests were performed, comparing the Lubavitch group's level of depression as measured by the CES-D scale with Radloff's "Kansas City white female" group and the "Washington County white female" group.

Insert Table 1

The Lubavitch group was significantly less depressed than the Kansas City group ($t=1.96$, $p<.025$). The Lubavitch group was

also significantly less depressed than the Washington County group ($t=1.89$, $p<.05$). The Lubavitch group had half the rate of depression of the two comparison groups: 11.6% of the Lubavitch women were depressed (measured by scoring above the cutoff point of 16), compared with 22.4% of the Kansas City group and the 22.3% of the Washington County group.

Within the Lubavitch group, amount of depression is negatively correlated with the amount of help with the housework the subject employs ($r=-.39$, $p<.006$); the more paid help they have, the less depressed they are. A curvilinear relationship appears between the subjects' level of depression and level of employment: women who are employed full-time and housewives score similarly on the CES-D ($X=9.2$ and $X=8.2$ respectively). Women employed part-time are less depressed than either of the above, with a mean depression level of 5.3. An analysis of variance comparing the three subgroups did not yield a significant difference ($F=1.24$, $p<.30$) but the considerable differnce in depression between the part-time workers and the other two groups strongly suggests that using larger subsamples would have yielded a significant difference.

Life Satisfaction.

Insert Table 2

The Lubavitch group was significantly more satisfied with life in general than Campbell et. al.'s (1976) group ($t=1.87$,

$p<.05$). However, Lubavitch women enjoyed mothering less ($t=8.84$, $p<.001$), were less satisfied with doing housework ($t=5.77$, $p<.005$), and spent less time in the company of their husbands ($t=7.11$, $p<.001$). There was no difference between the two groups in satisfaction with marriage. Within the Lubavitch group, women who spent more time with their husbands were more satisfied with their marriages ($r=.30$, $p<.03$).

The Lubavitch women unanimously stated that they preferred the Lubavitch lifestyle over a secular one. The most frequently given reasons, as expected, concerned the value placed upon the Lubavitch woman's role, and a strong sense of purpose in her life. A number of women however also stated that they wished they had more time for pursuing their secular education.

DISCUSSION

It seems paradoxical that Lubavitch women are less depressed and more satisfied with their lives in general and yet report less enjoyment derived from housework and mothering than others. Perhaps Lubavitch women enjoy housework and mothering less because they have more children to care for and therefore more work. Lubavitch women regard having children as a job, in God's service. It is a job they need not enjoy all the time; they only need to do it well, to get a sense of satisfaction.

Lubavitch women spend less time with their husbands, but, being that they live in a close knit community, they substitute companionship with other women. Hence, this lack of companionship between Lubavitch spouses did not cause Lubavitch

women to be less satisfied with their marriages than the norms. However, within the Lubavitch group, the amount of time spent with one's spouse is indicative of one's marital satisfaction.

The Lubavitch women's lower depression supports the importance of a highly valued, clearly defined role, especially in light of the way the women described their lives. Subjects said that Lubavitch women "know what is expected of them," have "structure to their lives," "a sense of purpose in their role," and "no identity crises." Concerning the importance of her role, one subject said that "the woman's status in this community is higher, because the things that she is involved with--the children, the house, the Sabbath and religious holidays--are important." Another subject said that "when a woman decides to be in the home, the home becomes spiritual and she becomes the pillar of Judaism." Such thoughts were echoed throughout the interviews, and one can find similar sentiments in the writings of the Lubavitch leaders, who pay tribute to the importance of women's family roles in an effort to prove that their traditional lifestyle can bring women more fulfillment than any feminist visions.

The fact that the Lubavitch community is more closely knit than most secular communities may also contribute to the Lubavitch women's well-being. Erikson (1976) illustrates the importance of a sense of community and belonging. Especially for women with small children, having neighbors with whom one can interact daily prevents social isolation and provides

abundant opportunities for social reinforcement.

Comparisons within the Lubavitch group point to some further variables which may affect women's mental health: Lubavitch women who receive paid help with the household are less likely to be depressed than those who have no help, and women working part-time tend to be less depressed than those working full-time or than housewives. Overwork may be an especially large problem for Lubavitch women, because they have more children to take care of (Cherry and Eaton (1977) showed that in the general population a large number of children is associated with increased stress).

Might the Lubavitch women's better mental health be solely a consequence of their being religious rather than their having clearly defined roles? William James (1902) wrote that religion may enhance mental health by giving direction and meaning to one's life. Or it might be as Freud (1964) asserts, that religiosity in itself is a neurotic symptom, which makes the emergence of other symptoms superfluous. In a review of the literature, Becker (1971) found a positive relationship between religion and mental health: "The absence of mental illness and neurotic symptoms does have certain favourable correlations with religious identity and activity" (p. 415).

Religious ritual may be beneficial in that it provides standards of behavior and opportunities for self--reinforcement. A Lubavitch person's daily life, if lived according to the prescriptions of the religion, provides continual opportunities for self- reinforcement. Each time a

Lubavitch woman shops for food or prepares it, she fulfills the commandment of using only kosher food. When she eats she says a blessing before and after, transforming eating into a religious experience. Each day as she dons modest clothing and covers her hair, she is performing a religious act. Cleaning the house before the Sabbath is a religious commandment (for this reason husbands are expected to help with the housework on Friday afternoons). The numerous rituals and restrictions of the Sabbath and holidays, when observed meticulously, provide a feeling of having done the right thing. A person who follows the prescriptions of the religion can point to concrete positive actions that she or he has performed successfully (and, conversely, one who ignores a commandment risks feeling guilty).

It is difficult to separate the effects of being religious from the lifestyle of the Lubavitch women to explain their lower rates of depression. The two are closely related, almost indistinguishable, since their religion affects most thoughts and mundane activities. Their religion provides the Lubavitch women with a lifestyle and a set of beliefs that seem beneficial to their mental health. But a different, non--religious ideology or lifestyle might do the same, in the words of one of the Lubavitch women, by providing a "blueprint for living."

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Table 1.

Depression Level of the Lubavitch Group Versus the Kansas City White Female Group and the Washington County White Female Group.

Group	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	Percent at and above cutoff score of 16
Lubavitch	42	7.36	6.34	11.9%
Kansas City White Female	541	10.32	9.48	22.4%
Washington County White Female	959	10.03	8.95	22.3%

Lubavitch vs. Kansas City White Female	t=1.996	p<.025
Lubavitch vs. Washington County White Female	t=1.889	p<.05

Table 2.

Life Satisfaction of the Lubavitch Group Compared to the Norms Provided by Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers.

a. Overall, How Satisfied Are You with Your Housework? Which Number Comes Closest to How Satisfied or Dissatisfied You Feel?

	Very dissatisfied 1	2	3	4	5	6	Very satisfied 7	Total	N	$\bar{X}$	SD
Lubavitch	4.5%	14	8	20	35	14	4.5	100%	43	4.27	1.53
Norm	2%	3	4	15	11	21	44	100%	1128	5.07	1.57

$t=5.77$ $p<.005$

b. Would You Say that Being a Mother Has Always Been Enjoyable, Nearly Always, Usually, Sometimes, or that Being a Mother Has Hardly Ever Been Enjoyable?

	1 Always	2 Nearly always	3 Usually	4 Some-times	5 Hardly ever	Total	N	$\bar{X}$	SD
Lubavitch	20.5%	56	20.5	3	0	100%	39	2.05	.97
Norm	42%	36	16	6	0	100%	964	1.86	.89

$t=8.84$ $p<.001$

Table 2 cont'd.

c. How Much Companionship Do You and Your Husband Have--How Often Do You Do Things Alone Together?

	1 All the time	2 Very often	3 Often	4 Some-times	5 Hardly ever	Total	N	$\overline{X}$	SD
Lubavitch	7%	18.5	21	35	18.5	100%	43	3.39	1.02
Norm	37%	33	15	11	4	100%	645	2.12	1.14

t=7.11 p<.001

d. All Things Considered, How Satisfied Are You with Your Marriage?

	Completely dissatisfied 1	2	3	4	5	6	Completely satisfied 7	Total	N	$\overline{X}$	SD
Lubavitch	0%	0	0	0	15.5	27.5	57	98%	42	6.42	.74
Norm	1%	1	2	9	8	23	56	100%	763	6.14	1.26

t=1.36 n.s.

e. How Satisfied Are You with Your Life as a Whole?

	Completely dissatisfied 1	2	3	4	5	6	Completely satisfied 7	Total	N	$\overline{X}$	SD
Lubavitch	0%	0	0	2	20.5	54.5	22	100%	43	5.96	3.02
Norm	1%	2	3	10	22	41	21	100%	881	5.57	1.21

t=1.87 p<.05